

# Letters to the Editor

## CRITICISM VERSUS ANTHROPOLOGY

Dance performance critic Deborah Jowitt's *DRJ* 20/2 review of an anthropologist's book, *Dance, Sex, and Gender: Signs of Identity, Dominance, Defiance, and Desire* (University of Chicago Press, 1988), raises the issue of theory and method in dance research. There are at least two broad differences between criticism and anthropology, notwithstanding the various approaches within each field.

First, critics generally describe, interpret, and evaluate dance using their own *subjective* judgment and aesthetic values. Not only do they help readers decide whether to attend a performance, but critics offer viewpoints on dances that readers saw or missed (1).

By contrast, anthropologists seek facts based on *objective* characteristics and the "native's point of view," which is identified (2). Presenting data and sources allows other researchers to check the validity of the writer's work. (Of course, some subjectivity is inevitable. Guided by contemporary ethics, anthropologists attempt to identify their biases and overcome them as well as to point out the epistemological implications of their methods.) Anthropologists assume that what we think is obvious may not be. In the past, anthropologists had viewed people as existing in a culture and described their patterns of behavior. More recently, culture is presupposed to be in peoples' heads. In *Dance, Sex, and Gender*, one of my concerns is with people's perceptions of sexuality and gender and how these mesh with society and the power structure; such perceptions may be revealed through people's own words.

While Jowitt faults relying "heavily on the words, interpretations, and opinions" of others (p. 57) and complains that "giving sources along the way . . . further conspires to distance Hanna from

her own book" (p. 58), an anthropologist expects this from a writer interested in the perceptions, the voices, of others (3). Occasionally some critics extensively quote dancers' or choreographers' views in articles about them.

Anthropology is more than, as Jowitt writes in her book, a

longstanding addiction to *National Geographic* . . . I imagined myself an anthropologist skulking in ambush, observing the activities of members of a hitherto undiscovered tribe—trying to discern their customs and social hierarchy before I stepped out of the bushes and made myself known to them. (4)

Second, anthropology differs from criticism in having explicit *theoretical orientations*, developed from work in the social and behavioral sciences, that frame the subject studied, relationships discussed, and issues raised. Unfortunately Jowitt's four-column review neglects this content (suggested by the book's full title) and focuses primarily on writing style ("I decided that much of what bothered me about this book had to do with writing," p. 58) (5).

Surely dealing with at least some of the book's points, for example, what is nature and what is culture, similarities and differences in dance cultures of the world, the past and present context of dance, onstage-offstage relationships, how images show people models for being male or female (sex role scripting), how the production and direction of performance influences patterns of dominance in dance and society, recurring themes of male dominance and women as objects of male definition, the impact of the gay and women's liberation movements, and changes in sexuality, gender roles, identities, statuses, and power, would have better served the review's readers.

## NOTES

1. Hanna, Judith Lynne, "The Impact of the Critic: Comments from the Critic and the Criticized," in John Robinson, ed. *Social Science and the Arts*, Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1984, pp. 142-62.
2. Hanna, Judith Lynne, "The Anthropology of Dance," in *Dance: Current Selected Research*, Vol. I, Lynnette Y. Overby and James H. Humphrey, eds. New York: AMS Press, 1989, pp. 219-237.
3. See Sue-Ellen Jacobs, "Review of *Dance, Sex, and Gender*," *American Anthropologist*, 91(1):249-50, March 1989.
4. Deborah Jowitt, *Time and the Dancing Image*, New York: William Morrow and Company, 1988, p. 7.
5. Perhaps my writing is not up to her standards; but before criticizing an author's conceptual distinctions, a reviewer might consult Webster's *Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, used by University of Chicago Press, for definitions and synonyms.

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## JOWITT REPLIES

In *Dance, Sex, and Gender*, in a section subtitled "The Dance Critic as Sage and Shaman," Judith Lynne Hanna situates the critic within the culture that he or she comments on, thus preserving the correct anthropological stance of trying to examine data as the "natives" interpret it, rather than relying solely on an outsider's observation. Yet, although she uses critics as spokespeople for western dance more frequently than she uses the words of choreographers and dancers or her own "fieldwork," she implies that a critic is unfit to criticize *Dance, Sex, and Gender* because the purposes, methods, and theoretical backgrounds of critics and anthropologists differ.

I wish that, in order to make her point